Empowering youths: a case study of *The Voice Incorporated*

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Abstract

In this study, the researcher was looking for a definition of the concept of 'empowerment' and how it was embedded in youth development programs that attempt to raise the self-esteem of marginalized young people and empower them to lead productive lives. Issues facing young people were identified as limited access to education and inadequate employment opportunities that frequently lead to crime, violence, substance abuse and high-risk behaviour. In addition to reviewing relevant literature, a case study was made of *The Voice Incorporated* organization. This organization was established by students at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) as a way for students to look within themselves to discover their unique personalities and unleash the gifts and potential that lies dormant within them. While the term 'empowerment' was not used in formulation of *The Voice* programs, this research highlights 'empowerment' as their core function.

Key words: Pacific Island countries, Papua New Guinea, youth, empowerment, participation, youth development

Introduction

Approximately 20% of the total population of the Pacific island countries and territories is aged between 15 and 24 years, representing the most dynamic elements in the Pacific Island societies (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2009, p. 5). Most of the Pacific Island countries are characterized by high numbers of young people dropping out of school and unable to find employment. Many others are turning to risky behaviours, exposing themselves to the dangers of substance abuse, unplanned pregnancies, sexually transmitted infections and HIV/AIDS. There are many youths on the streets who feel they have no place in their own homes and communities. Many youths have often resorted to suicide while others have turned to criminal activities as a means of survival (McMurray, 2006).

The development of any country should be inclusive of the wellbeing of all their citizens and this includes the youth population. Many youth programs have been designed and implemented with an aim to empower young people. But have we stopped to ask them what empowerment means to them? We often overlook this simple question.

This research explored the experiences of an organization called *The Voice* formed by young students of the University of Papua New Guinea. It illustrates

how young people in Papua New Guinea define empowerment, and how they have developed and implemented their own projects and programs, using that definition to contribute back to their communities.

Objective

Many youth projects and programs have the objective of empowering youths but the question is 'what does empowerment mean to a youth?' Getting the youth perspective on what empowerment means can provide a useful insight when trying to formulate and implement youth projects, strategies and policies. This research provides a stepping stone towards a more comprehensive study and consultations with young people in Papua New Guinea on their thoughts on empowerment. It illustrates one approach that can be undertaken to contribute to the implementation of the current National Youth Policy and one approach which can be adopted by all actors involved in youth work in PNG. Young people can contribute to national development simply through developing projects reflecting their definition of empowerment.

Definitions

Youth
There are different definitions of youth used by different actors in the Pacific. The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat terms of reference for the UNDP Regional Initiative on engaging marginalized youths, states that *youth is about a group of people who are negotiating the transition from childhood to adulthood, from dependence to independence, from a passive social position to an active social position* - the age when this happens differs from one country to another. The United Nations definition of youth is *those people in the ages from 15-24 years* while those from 0-14 are considered as children. However, Article 1 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of a Child defines 'children' as persons up to the age of 18. This is intentional in order to provide protection and rights to a larger age group. Within the Pacific, it is common for those up to the age of 30 and unmarried to be regarded as youths as well.

Empowerment
Empowerment as a theory originates from the Brazilian humanitarian and educator, Paulo Freire (1973), when he suggested a plan for liberating the oppressed people of the world through education (Hur, 2006). Freire stated that the oppressed or the disadvantaged can become empowered by learning about social inequality (i.e. conscientizing), encouraging others by making them feel confident about achieving social equality, and finally liberating them (Hur, 2006, p. 527).

According to the *Commonwealth Plan of Action for Youth Empowerment 2007-2015*, the Commonwealth Youth Ministers and Heads of Government have endorsed the view that:
1)   Young people are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of the implications of those choices,

2)   make an informed decision freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of those actions.

2)   Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others. These enabling conditions fall into four broad categories: i) an economic and social base; ii) political will, adequate resource allocation and supportive legal and administrative frameworks; iii) a stable environment of equality, peace and democracy; and iv) access to knowledge, information and skills, and a positive value system.

Youth empowerment

According to Diwan (2003), youth empowerment is based on the belief that young people are the best resources for promoting their development and that they must be both architects and agents in meeting the challenges and solving the problems faced in today's world in the new millennium.

Youth participation

Youth participation is the way in which young people function and interact in society. It involves their roles in their families and in the wider community, and their participation in various aspects of life including education, the workforce, community activities and decision making. Central to the concept of youth participation are youth empowerment and youth engagement. That is being able to function effectively and work towards achieving their personal objectives and taking control of their lives (McMurray, 2006, p. 12).

Research method

The research involved a case study of *The Voice Incorporated,* a youth development organization of the University of Papua New Guinea. The main methods used for collecting data were questionnaires, interviews, observations, conversational interviews, written documents and official videos. Data interpretation was checked by the Executive Director of *The Voice.* Some constraints were the time factor for conducting the study and the availability of interviewees as they were students and had study commitments. Some founding members of *The Voice* could not be reached for interviews due to their work schedules. A strength was that I was previously a member of *The Voice* and had some insight into its goals and activities.

Literature review

In societies throughout Papua New Guinea, and in a number of Pacific Island nations, public decision making about significant family or community events has traditionally been the prerogative of older male family, clan or community members (O'Collins, 1985, p. 238). Youths and women were not allowed to speak nor have their views presented.

While approximately 20 per cent of the total population of Pacific Island countries and territories is aged between 15 and 24 years, this figure is not

represented in decision making processes. In both their families and communities, young people are expected to 'be seen and not heard' and there are few avenues for them to participate actively by voicing their needs. McMurray (2006) further explains that many parents expect their children to do as they are told without question and that government investment in youth is principally in the form of health and education services and that children and youth are expected to be satisfied with the services provided for them and remain silent.

UNICEF (2005, cited by The World Bank, 2009) stated that it is evident that in most Pacific Island countries, young people are not completing secondary education and because of the lack of suitable employment activities, they turn to risky and criminal activities and are therefore unable to reach their full potential. The Pacific Islands Forum Secretariat argued that the socio-economic and political marginalization of youth has consistently been identified as one of the main factors which can contribute to youth adopting negative behaviours and getting involved in crime and violent conflict.

The issue of law and order is one of the major impediments to development of any country and Papua New Guinea is no exception. The high levels of criminal activities have been blamed mostly on youths and lead to lowered levels of respect for this sector of the community. Youth issues continue to be a major concern in the region. Most efforts have focused on addressing the symptoms rather than the causes. UNICEF has suggested emphasis on youth participation or engagement in addressing the causes rather than involving them at the 'problem stage' (cited by World Bank, 2009, p. 5). UNICEF argues that the idea of investing in youth as a resource for development rather than regarding them as a problem group in society must be encouraged.

Background of youth status in the Pacific

The transition from childhood to adulthood involves physical, psychological and social changes and is almost always challenging.

> …the major task for adolescents is to re-evaluate who they are and how their bodies and identities have changed. They strive to establish final independence from their families and others their age, to become their own persons. They struggle to understand the meaning of life and how to interact with others of the opposite sex. They are faced with answering the question of how they want to spend the rest of their lives…''
>
> (Donley & Keen, 2000, cited in McMurray, 2006)

While many countries in the world struggle with issues relating to ageing populations, the Pacific faces the challenges of having youthful populations (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2009). Inadequate educational and formal employment opportunities leave many young people with limited skills and life choices which can attack their self-esteem and worth, ultimately causing them to turn to negative and risky behaviours.

The Pacific is linked to cultural and societal norms and to a social structure of hierarchy and authority. Young people in the Pacific Island countries are traditionally expected to accept authority without question. A study by The World Bank (2008) reported that ignorance and unwillingness of parents and those in authority to understand the needs of young people limit youth participation in development even though youths state the adults and community leaders are aware of youth concerns.

The following are the three main issues for youth in the Pacific according to a World Bank report (2009).

> ***Poor employment prospects:*** The growing youth bulge in the Pacific Island countries will not be fully engaged in the labour force because of low levels of investment and job creation. The shortage of skilled people for available jobs and the oversupply of unskilled workers reflect a great concern. Though some end up securing jobs, many are left constrained by limited education and experience and face difficulties in finding ways to improve in these aspects.

> ***Increasing marginalization:*** The biggest issue facing youth in many Pacific countries is the fear and reality of finding themselves marginalized and voiceless. According to Jayaweera and Morioka (2008, p. 10), the biggest issue facing youth in many Pacific countries is the fear and reality of finding themselves marginalized and voiceless. Through a study the researchers conducted on Youth Development through Participation, they found that the demographic shift in favour of a younger population suggested that the largest, fastest growing and arguably most important age group were finding it difficult to make any meaningful contribution to their country's future.

> ***Crime, violence and risky behaviour:*** The negative social and economic impact of reduced opportunities for youth are well understood and that there are reasons to fear that these [reduced opportunities] could intensify to a degree that creates instability. For instance, back in 1999-2000, there was a conflict that occurred in the Solomon Islands which was caused by a group of young people who were not satisfied with the opportunities available for them. The recent riot leading to looting and burning of Asian shops in Kainantu in PNG by youths is another example.

These issues undermine the capacity of young people to contribute to their society and enjoy a fulfilling life. Those who do not receive sufficient or appropriate education and/or do not obtain employment can be viewed on one hand as under-utilized economic and social resources and on the other hand as citizens who are denied their social entitlement (McMurray, 2006). The lack of opportunities for young people either blocks or delays their transition to adulthood and often results in frustration, low self-esteem and many turn to alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution and criminal activities.

In 2006, the World Bank Group (Papua New Guinea) commissioned Youth for a Sustainable Future Pacifika to undertake research into issues affecting young people's lives in six Pacific Island countries: Papua New Guinea, Fiji, Samoa, Solomon Islands, Tonga and Vanuatu. The research project resulted from youth consultations for the World Development Report (2007) in the South Pacific, which revealed a significant lack of understanding of the nature and reasons for marginalization of Pacific youth and how to encourage their participation in the development process. The research findings showed that the young people who took part in the research shared a vision, a vision to address the problems faced by young people in their country and being involved in making a positive change for themselves and their families.

Youth status in PNG

Papua New Guinea is the largest Pacific Island nation both in terms of population, approximately 6.5 million with a growth rate over 2%, and in terms of land mass, approximately 461,690 square kilometres (Government of PNG, 2009). Forty percent (40%) of the sex-age structure is under the age of 15 years meaning that Papua New Guinea has a youthful population. Together with a population projected to double in 30 years, there is going to be a high demand and pressure on limited resources for further development and improvement in service delivery, including implementation of policies aimed at achieving the Millennium Development Goals (UNDP cited by UNESCO, 2007).

Primarily, lack of education and employment opportunities may be listed as issues facing youths; however, there are many factors involved that are beyond the control of young people. For example, a young person may have the desire to go to school and to further their education but the lack of financial resources for school fees does not allow this to happen. The lack of spaces in higher education and tertiary levels is another underlying factor. Many educated young people do not progress on to formal employment because there is a lack of employment opportunities for them.

The following status of young people in Papua New Guinea is summarised from the *National Youth Policy 2007-2017* document (National Youth Commission of Papua New Guinea, 2007).

> ***The family:*** Papua New Guinea since Independence has experienced changes both socially and economically due to the process of modernization causing communities to seek wage employment. This has brought about confusion and broken down cultural controls and discipline methods within communities. The lack of housing and employment opportunities results in youths getting married or teenage girls having unplanned pregnancies while still living with their parents thus causing strain on food resources and other necessities. Ultimately many people become discontent and end up with families disintegrating and young people often left to fend for themselves.

Population growth: With a population growth rate well above 2% per year (UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia Pacific, 2007; PNG Department of State, 2007, cited in UNESCO 2007) and the population estimated to double every 30 years, there is already pressure on existing resources. The high youth dependency of 40 % under the age of 15, affects the family's capacity to adequately cater for the needs of its family members.

Education: More children and youth are able to be educated to grade 10 and 12 under the current education system which promotes universal education. However, the limited number of spaces, high school fees, inadequate facilities, lack of qualified teachers and learning materials, lack of parental support towards the importance of education, and the inability of most families to send their children to school, are some underlying factors causing the low retention rates for many young people.

Employment: The formal labour force, according to the Department of Education, has been able to employ less than 10,000 from the almost 80,000 young people who leave the education system each year. National statistics show that only 53% of children have completed primary school, 30% are not attending schools and 33% have never attended school. Only about 5% of the population has completed secondary school, with slightly higher figures for urban (13.6%) populations (National Statistics Office, 2000).

Urbanization and urban migration: Two main factors that cause growth in urban population are: 1) migration of rural people to urban centers and 2) the desire for modernization for commerce and industry with the desire for urban facilities such as health and education. With the high rate of school drop outs and unemployment among youths and the lack of family or social support, many youths become disadvantaged and often turn to alcohol and drug abuse, prostitution, gangs and criminal activities.

Importance of empowering youth

'Problem behavior' in young people is widely recognized by social workers and psychologists as a response to stressed situations or circumstances (UNICEF Pacific, Secretariat of the Pacific Community and UNPF, 2005). Young people have a high level of energy and have potential to work hard. They are full of ideas and it is important to have channels to express themselves and opportunities to develop their attributes. When they are unable to find creative and constructive channels to positively utilize their talents and energy, they turn these energies towards negative behaviour. Thus they are often blamed as being the problem or causing problems in families, communities and the country. This misconception is the reason why youth issues still exist.

The issues stated such as youths engaging in criminal activities, prostitution, drug and alcohol abuse are not problems in themselves but symptoms of

underlying and interrelated economic and social problems .There are many projects and programs developed to prevent high risk youth behaviour and little has been done towards addressing the underlying causes. Because 'problem behaviour' is a response to stressed situation or circumstances, then behaviour is what has to be targeted.

When one has a positive view about oneself, one has a high self esteem as opposed to low self-esteem. Those with a positive self view, have confidence and are optimistic in challenging situations. They can overcome setbacks and continue to pursue their goals in life. On the other hand, lack of confidence, negative outlook and lack of determination and persistence is the result of having low self-esteem.

According to a study done by UNICEF Pacific, Secretariat of the Pacific Community and UNPF (2005), there are at least two reasons why empowering youth is the key to addressing many youth issues. First, when youths are disempowered and marginalized rather than productively employed, they depend on others for support, thus becoming burdens on society rather than assets. Utilizing their skills turns them into productive members in society. Second, empowering youths assists them to discover their potential and reduces high risk behaviour.

The research explores what empowerment means to *The Voice* and how they have used that definition to formulate their programs. It also illustrates how a group of young people who are passionate about making a positive change in their lives and that of their families and communities can influence other young people around them to realize that they too can discover their potential and voice to speak up to make a difference.

Case study: *The Voice*

The Voice is a vibrant youth development organization run by the youth for the youth. Through training, mentoring and guidance young people are encouraged to look within themselves to discover their unique personalities and unleash the potential that lies dormant within them. *The Voice* also creates avenues for young people to get involved in their communities through advocating on issues and implementing small projects. *The Voice* is proudly supported by the University of Papua New Guinea and is committed to building the young people of the nation.

The Voice was set up by a group of students from the University of Papua New Guinea who decided for themselves that just talking about issues that they read, listened to and watched from the media was not enough. They realized that the thing that separated them from people in rural areas and those disadvantaged is their higher level of education. With determination to do something about youth issues, they set out to form *The Voice* which was formally launched in 2007 by the Governor General His Excellency, Sir Paulius Matane. After conducting a large number of activities including workshops, community

outreach programs, concerts and rural challenges, to analyze the problems *The Voice* came up with the following statement.

> Many young people do not have vision for their lives. Many live surrounded by violence, poverty, alcohol and drug abuse, purposelessness and idleness. And yet, all people have a purpose in life and lack of knowledge of that purpose causes people to live far below their potential. The deepest craving of the human spirit is to find a sense of significance and relevance. This search for relevance in life is the ultimate pursuit of man and the passion for significance knows no boundaries. The key to having positive communities is to give our young people a sense of significance and relevance. It is by enabling them to realize their purpose and potential, their responsibility to use their gifts, talents, passions and dreams to serve their world.

From this basis they formed the vision of the organization to see generations of young people driven by purpose and confident in the value of their contribution to their communities, nation and the world. Their mission is: *to empower young people through their educational programs to become confident individuals and to create avenues for them to contribute back to their communities.* 'Empowerment in terms of *The Voice* is really getting people to come to that place where they are passionate to want to act.' (Serena Sasingian, founder and Executive Director of *The Voice)*
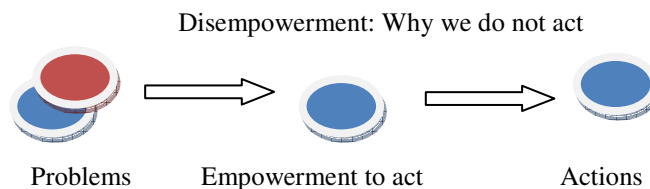
Disempowerment: Why we do not act

Problems   Empowerment to act   Actions

Figure: 1 What empowerment means to *The Voice Incorporated.*

Realising that education does not guarantee a good and fulfilling life, *The Voice* believes that the fundamental problem facing developing nations such as Papua New Guinea is not poverty, law and order, resources or corruption but rather people; the lack of purpose and significance that citizens have. *The Voice* has a four step enabling process aimed at achieving their mission.

1. *The Voice* enables young people to reach their full potential through training and mentoring
2. The training and mentoring enables the young people to create change through the designing and implementation of their own programs
3. Our programs enable community development through advocacy and sustainable project work
4. Our advocacy and project work enables progress to be reached in achieving our vision and values.

(*The Voice* Strategic Directions Statements)

Therefore *The Voice* designed a training program called the DREAM program which stands for Drive, Relationship, Education, Attitude and Mission. It was aimed at young first and second year university students who undergo a ten-week program of self discovery of their gifts and talents to discover how best they could effectively contribute back to their communities. Students in third or fourth year or those who had graduated from UPNG and were part of *The Voice* were engaged to give encouragement and support. Following are a few comments from participants which attest to the success of the program.

> *'The DREAM Program is overwhelmingly amazing, motivating and inspirational. I feel a sense of purpose and belonging just by being a part of it. It makes me see things from a perspective I never knew existed and also helps me in getting to know myself as an individual whose contribution counts to her country if she will only give herself a chance. Everything about the Dream Program, I embrace'.* (Claire, 1st year Political Science student, Dreamer)

> *'The DREAM Program has built my confidence. It has taught me to be honest and it has also taught me that my point of view counts'.* (Tomas, student, Dreamer)

> *'The DREAM Program really helped me to see where I am standing in life, the society and what I can use in me to make a change'.* (Clyde, 1st year student, Dreamer).

The *DREAM* Program was first carried out in 2008. It has now developed into the main training program of *The Voice,* primarily aimed at motivating the young people participating to discover within themselves what they want to achieve in life, discover what they are passionate about, and help them to find an avenue to pursue their passions.

Barbara was in the second year of her studies when she attended the first *DREAM* Program session on Motuporea Island in 2008. Now a final year Environmental Chemistry student, her passion is to work with communities and help people realise that they have a purpose in life. Barbara developed the Community Advocacy Project of *The Voice* with the main message being to empower individuals in communities to be purposeful, discourage idleness and to advocate that the power to change lies in one's own hands. Despite the demanding nature of being a student, especially in her final year, Barbara organised her team to visit Mina, a missionary who took in street kids and provided them with not only food and shelter but also taught them about hygiene, good manners and virtues.

> *'When you're passionate about something, you find the drive to do what you have to do, so you find the time'.* (Barbara, mentor)

When asked why they wanted to be a part of this group to visit these street kids, the team members gave similar insights.

'Children are always looking up to someone, some role model figure that they will see and they will want to follow…by connecting to them, I personally hope that I will be a figure to them because given the background that I came from, I once lived in the streets, in the settlements where there are a lot of homeless children where there is no role model or figure for them to look up to in which the children can be led astray and involve in all sorts of illegal activities. What I hope is to be a role model and maybe they will follow my example and try to be somebody in the future'. (Joel, 2nd year law student, Dreamer)

'The parents don't see the value of education. Even though Mina [the missionary] is the one paying for their school fees, the parents don't take them to school or have an active involvement in their education. So I think it is important for us as role models to go there, encourage them and let them know that they can become chefs, pilots or whatever they dream about becoming in the future'. (Lisa, 3rd year law student, Mentor)

Photograph 1: *The Voice* **Community Advocacy Team**

The DREAM program is causing positive mindsets and raised self esteem among the participants called 'Dreamers'. It creates an inner awareness of their capabilities and nurtures them into confident young people who want to make a positive change for themselves and those around them.

Interpretations on youth perspectives about empowerment

The findings will be classified into three broad categories: self awareness about youth empowerment; perspective or definition of empowerment and importance of empowering youth. Researchers have identified empowerment as a key component to a positive youth development approach (Benson, 1997 cited in Wong, 2008).

Self awareness about empowerment

The first question asked, before handing out the questionnaire to the members of *The Voice* was; have you ever been interviewed before regarding young people's perspective on youth empowerment? Two out of the eight members who participated in this qualitative research, said 'yes'. One explained that while in high school, the World Bank representatives asked the students what their views were about issues facing the country.

When asked if the students were asked specifically about how they defined the concept of empowerment, the answer was 'no'. This primary question was asked verbally to random young people not part of *The Voice* during informal conversations and all replied 'no'. When asked about the importance of defining 'empowerment' all responded that they have never really given much thought to it. The initial questionnaire did not include the question but was asked verbally. Upon collection of the questionnaire, the need became apparent to include the question to have the answer captured in writing.

Empowerment occurs through the creation of a collective critical consciousness also known as critical awareness which, according to Freire, is achieved when 'people develop their power to perceive critically *the way they exist* in the world *with which* and *in which* they find themselves; they come to see the world not as a static reality, but as a reality in the process, in transformation' (italics in original, [1970] 2003, p. 83 cited in Wong, 2008). He also explains that people are oppressed or disempowered when they are unaware of causes that shape their conditions. This is reflected through the case study. *The Voice* was established as a result of collective awareness about issues occurring around the country and the world and the passion to want to act. Further, through their activities they create a sense of awareness among their members about the significance of one's potential and responsibility to serve their communities, the nation and the world.

As discovered through the data collected, empowerment as a concept was not the actual term used as the basis in the formulation of the DREAM program; rather it was a result of the principles and values of *The Voice*. Not much emphasis was given to what the concept means to a youth despite being widely used.

Perspective about youth empowerment

Before exploring participants' perspectives about youth empowerment, there were some lead-in questions such as: Describe a situation where as a young person, you were not heard or not involved and how did that make you feel? The majority responded relating to their villages where culture still plays a significant role in drawing the line of responsibility between elders and youths and the elders retaining the decision making power. Gender inequality was also highlighted and was linked again to culture. One male responded that lack of family support for his interests often made him feel left out.

Youth empowerment according to Wong (2008) requires adults to be actively involved in fostering conditions and opportunities for youth to develop critical consciousness. It can be argued that other adult figures apart from parents, can offer the necessary support that youths needs to motivate them. *The Voice* has two older people as its chairperson and vice-chairperson who give advice and guidance to their operations. When youths find peers who have the same values and interests, this may also lead to empowerment as they discuss and share ideas.

Although youth projects, in which participants were involved, were concerned with 'youth empowerment', the study found that participants had not actually analysed the term until they were asked. Table 2 presents an analysis of the responses of participants which reflects the main view that the involvement of adults in the process is critical.

Table 1: Respondents' views youth empowerment.

Definition of youth empowerment	%
Adults providing opportunities for youths to participate	65%
Communication between adults and youths	20%
Process of self discovery of potentials (linked to the DREAM program)	15%

Importance of empowering youths

On the other hand, the values of the DREAM program (drive, relationship, education, attitude and mission) were promoted through activities provided by senior students for junior students at the University. They were aimed at helping people discover what they wanted to achieve in life and were passionate about, and how they could build on this to be productive citizens in society. While the term 'empowerment' was not used in formulation of the DREAM program, this research highlights 'empowerment' as its core function.

> 'When you want to empower someone, you can't empower them unless you give them the opportunity to do it themselves. They have to be able to experience whatever that is, so that they can have the feeling of what's happening. Otherwise, it's like saying, I'm going to swim, but you're on land. You have to be in the water to learn how to swim. (Cargo, et al., n.d)

Through *The Voice*, youth empowerment emerged as a process of self discovery and young people's passion to take action. Challenge, ongoing support and responsibility are also a part of this process. For example, Barbara defined empowerment as 'helping a youth to discover his or her potential or passions and then working with them to help facilitate that'. This self definition connects to the Community Advocacy Program she developed and an activity she organized under this where she and her team aimed to help Mina's street kids find their purpose in life just like they have.

The most common response to the importance of empowering youths today was, 'the old generation will pass and the young generation will take their place'. The data analysis shows that almost all respondents have overlooked what empowerment means even though they are part of a youth organization aimed at empowering other young people. Through observations and conversational interviews, it was noted that the young people interviewed were participants in the Dream program and the Community Advocacy Program. Yet they had not really understood what empowerment is, unlike Barbara and Serena who designed the programs. This clearly shows that those designing projects reflect their views of empowerment and not necessarily the views of those participating. However, all of them were eager about contributing in any way they could to make a positive change, be it within their friends, families or the wider community.

Summary

One purpose of this study was to find an answer to the question: 'what does empowerment mean to youths?' The findings revealed that the respondents had a very narrow or limited view of empowerment and most had never given much thought to analysing the term until they were asked. As this is a basic tenet of youth development programs, it is important that organizers have an understanding that,

> Young people are empowered when they acknowledge that they have or can create choices in life, are aware of the implications of those choices, make an informed decision freely, take action based on that decision and accept responsibility for the consequences of those actions; Empowering young people means creating and supporting the enabling conditions under which young people can act on their own behalf, and on their own terms, rather than at the direction of others, (Commonwealth Youth Commission, 2007).

This research explored youth issues in Pacific Island countries, with a focus on PNG, and how youth empowerment activities could be used to address those issues. The research used case study methodology to illustrate the approach of *The Voice* activities. This organization promoted a process of self discovery of a person's talents and consideration of how they could be put to optimal use to benefit others. The research uncovered strong links between the activities of *The Voice* and the concept of 'youth empowerment'.

There is no simple solution to addressing youth issues because underlying causes are interrelated. There are many different situations that young people are in. What youth empowerment means to university students such as those in the research will differ to a young person who has grown up in a family that has insufficient income to afford school fees, or a young person who has grown up in a violent family, or a young person who has lost one or both parents.

The Papua New Guinea National Youth Policy 2007-2017 calls for all sectors of the Papua New Guinea community, whether in public, private sector, non

government, faith-based organizations, international agencies, families and individuals to work together to assist our young people to achieve their pursued goals and to participate meaningfully in the country's development. The Minister responsible for all youth development in the country, Dame Carol Kidu gave this message; 'All young people are now called to step forward to play an active role on the implementation of this policy together with stakeholders. Your participation will ensure that you will derive maximum benefits from the Policy initiatives' (National Youth Commission, 2007).

It is time for youths to define for themselves who they are and how they want to make a change in their lives, their families, communities, their country and their world. This research found that the approach used by *The Voice* in its DRREAM program was an effective way for their participants to feel empowered to contribute to their personal and national development.

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